

This is a repository copy of *On the Appropriateness of Grief to its Object*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/181657/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Ratcliffe, Matthew James orcid.org/0000-0003-4519-4833, Richardson, Louise Fiona orcid.org/0000-0001-9484-7015 and Millar, Becky (Accepted: 2021) On the Appropriateness of Grief to its Object. Journal of the American Philosophical Association. (In Press)

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

On the Appropriateness of Grief to its Object

Matthew Ratcliffe, Louise Richardson, & Becky Millar

Abstract: How we understand the nature and role of grief depends on what we take its object to be and vice versa. This paper focuses on recent claims by philosophers that grief is frequently or even inherently irrational or inappropriate in one or another respect, all of which hinge on assumptions concerning the proper object of grief. By emphasizing the temporally extended structure of grief, we offer an alternative account of its object, which undermines these assumptions and dissolves the apparent problems. The principal object of grief, we suggest, is a loss of life-possibilities, which is experienced, understood, and engaged with over a prolonged period. Other descriptions of grief's object identify more specific aspects of this loss, in ways that do not respect a straightforward distinction between concrete and formal objects.

Keywords: concrete object; formal object; grief; life-possibilities; phenomenology; rationality; sinking-in

Introduction

When we experience grief in the event of a death, what is our grief *about*?¹ One could maintain that the concrete object of grief is the death of a person whom one cares about, either the event of the death or that person's being dead. However, perhaps the object of grief is not simply someone's death, but her absence from one's life. In other words, we grieve over the loss of a relationship. It is also arguable that grief has an additional "formal object", an evaluative property attributed to its concrete object that renders grief appropriate to that object. In the case of grief, the most plausible candidate is "loss" or a distinctive form of loss associated with bereavement.² Further questions then arise concerning how the relations between an experience of grief, the formal object of grief, and the concrete object of grief should be conceived of. These are the questions we are concerned with here. And it matters how they are answered, given that our understanding of what grief is and what grief does will depend on those answers.

¹ Although our discussion focuses specifically on grief over a death, the account we develop can also accommodate wider experiences of loss.

² Types of emotions are thus distinguished from one another by their formal objects. For instance, while the formal object of grief might be loss, the formal object of fear is threat. For further discussion of emotions and their formal objects, see, e.g., de Sousa (1987, Chapter 5) and Teroni (2007).

To illustrate what is at stake, consider a cluster of contemporary philosophical discussions, all of which conclude that grief is, in one or another respect, irrational or incomprehensible. A notable example is Gustafson (1989), who takes grief to have constituent beliefs and desires, including the belief that a person is dead and the desire that they not be dead. It thus incorporates a “counter-belief desire”, rendering it “irremediably less than fully rational” (Gustafson, 1989, pp.465-6).³ A more recent focus has been on the intensity of grief and the time it takes people to recover. Drawing on empirical findings concerning “resilience” among the bereaved, Moller (2007; 2017) points out that most of us recover faster than we might anticipate and suggests that the object of grief (the loss of someone who may have been immensely important to us) warrants a longer, more intense period of grieving. Thus, even though swift recovery may be psychologically beneficial, there is another way in which it remains regrettable.⁴ Indeed, it is arguable that *any* fading of grief is irrational. The object of grief—the loss of someone who matters greatly to us—remains “roughly the same”, rendering a merely *transient* emotional experience inappropriate to that object (Moller, 2017). Following a similar line of thought, Marušić (2018), concludes that the relationship between grief and its object is *rationaly incomprehensible* (as distinct from *irrational*), given that the pragmatic benefits of grief’s diminution over time do not render it “responsive to my reasons” (Marušić, 2018, p. 1).

Whether or not such concerns are legitimate hinges on assumptions concerning the object of grief. For Moller (2007; 2017), grief’s object is there having been a loss, while Marušić (2018, p.6) maintains that the “primary object” is someone’s being dead. Both observe that the object of grief is unchanging or, at least, does not change over time in quite the way that grief does. Hence, we face the question of why grief, being an emotional response that is—like other emotions—both directed at and justified by its object, diminishes over time in the way it usually does or even at all. The plausibility of Gustafson’s analysis equally depends on assumptions about grief’s object, which he takes to be someone’s having died, or having been “almost certainly lost or permanently separated” from the grieving subject (Gustafson, 1989, p. 464). This enables him to maintain that grief can have the same

³ Price (2010) suggests that the “yearning” of grief is instead a matter of emotional evaluation. So, it involves a less pernicious and more familiar form of irrationality: a conflict between emotional evaluation and belief that resembles conflicts between beliefs and certain perceptual experiences, such as optical illusions. Cholbi (2017) is also critical of Gustafson, pointing out that grief can incorporate a range of desires, which need not include desiring someone not to be dead.

⁴ Moller’s claims concerning the duration and intensity of typical grief are based on empirical findings concerning the prevalence of resilience (see, e.g., Bonanno, 2009). These findings and their implications are not uncontroversial (Smuts, 2016).

object as sorrow. The difference between them must therefore be found elsewhere, prompting Gustafson to distinguish between wishing that something had not happened, in sorrow, and desiring it not to have happened, in grief.

In what follows, we propose an alternative conception of grief's object, which dispenses with these apparent problems. We begin by observing that grief is not an episodic emotion, such as being fleetingly afraid of the dog or happy to see someone. Rather, it consists in a non-homogenous, temporally extended process. So, in contemplating the object of grief, we should consider what that process as a whole is directed at, rather than restricting ourselves to one or another time-slice or episode. Our discussion thus proceeds via a detailed phenomenological consideration of grief's temporal structure. This serves to show *why* grief diminishes over time and, importantly, why its failure to do so would amount to irrationality. In addition, it makes clear that certain tensions integral to grief are not a matter of conflict between belief and desire.

We go on to argue that the object of a grief process—what that process as a whole involves recognizing, comprehending, engaging with, and adapting to—is a *loss of life-possibilities*. Aspects of this can also be described in other ways, including the loss of a relationship, the loss of a person, and there having been a death. The phenomenology of grief, we add, does not conform to a straightforward distinction between formal and concrete objects (which need not detract from the analytic utility of the distinction). One could maintain that the formal object of grief is a loss of life-possibilities, but this is not fully, experientially present at any one time. Furthermore, grief does not involve a singular, temporally consistent target or concrete object. Instead, different aspects of a wider-ranging loss of possibilities are experienced as such at different times.

Sinking In

A common, although not always explicit, way of thinking about grief involves construing it as an emotional experience that is elicited by a distinct and prior recognition of loss. For instance, Moller (2007, p.313) asks us to imagine super-resilient beings who comprehend the fact of loss but do not feel any grief, suggesting a distinction between the initial comprehension of what has happened and an emotional reaction that may or may not follow it. To see what is wrong here, it should first be noted that grief involves a *process* of some kind (Goldie, 2012; Higgins, 2013, Ratcliffe, 2017). This can be accepted without endorsing anything more specific, such as a stage-model of grief, a conception of grief-work, or an account of the endpoint of grief. Furthermore, endorsing the claim that grief involves a

process does not require the assumption that this is *all* there is to grief or that the process always unfolds in the same way. It is important to keep in mind that people's experiences of grief vary considerably.

Key to understanding why grief involves a process and why aspects of grief diminish over time is an appreciation of the dynamic relationships between a person's experience of grief and her comprehension of its candidate objects, which we take to include (a) Person D has died; (b) Person D no longer exists; and (c) a relationship with Person D no longer exists or is at least radically altered. Grief is not simply a response to one or more of these facts; it is also integral to the bereaved person's comprehension of them over an extended period of time.

Note, first of all, that how one grieves over a death reflects—in part—the manner and extent to which the deceased was integrated into the structure of one's life. A close relationship with a particular person can be implicated in almost all of one's activities. Consider the many interconnected projects that one might be committed to and habitually immersed in. In the context of a project, one might do something for oneself, for the other person, or for both. Where a project and associated activities are “for them” or “for us”, the other person's death may render that project unintelligible—the relevant activities no longer make sense. Alternatively, a project might depend on that person's input in a contingent way, such that disruptions are potentially navigable, perhaps by drawing on the support of others. However, in considering the effects of bereavement on the structure of a life, it is important not to restrict ourselves to the disruption of goal-directed projects. All manner of pastimes can similarly depend upon being with a particular person. In cases such as a walk in the park, a visit to a cinema, or a dinner in the restaurant that “we” especially like, how one experiences and engages with one's surroundings may depend in various subtle ways on being with *that* person (Ratcliffe, 2020). Furthermore, their potential presence is also *anticipated* in various circumstances, such as upon waking, when entering a certain room, or when returning home from work. The various ways in which others are integrated into our lives, habitually anticipated, and taken for granted do not comprise a long list of separate, atomistic contributions. To the extent that our projects and commitments are coherently organized and integrated, so are the contributions that particular people make to them. Someone's death can therefore imply a profound change in one's own life-structure, something that has to be registered and comprehended in its entirety if one is to continue thinking and acting in ways that are appropriate to one's actual situation. As we will show, this requires a gradual process of comprehension.

Bennett Helm (e.g., 2009) draws helpful distinctions between the target (or concrete object), formal object, and focus of an emotional experience, which we will draw on in order to clarify what it is that we recognize, comprehend, and engage with through grief. According to Helm, an emotional experience involves attributing an evaluative property to the target or concrete object. For instance, an approaching tiger is experienced as frightening. Whether one's fear is appropriate depends on whether the properties of the target (the tiger) are consistent with the formal object of fear (threat). And this further depends on the "focus" of the emotion, defined as follows: "a background object having import that is related to the target in such a way as to make intelligible the target's having the evaluative property defined by the formal object" (Helm, 2009, p.251). So, the focus of the emotion is something that is valued (e.g., one's life; one's career; the well-being of another person), which relates to the target in a way that is consistent with the emotion's formal object. This renders an emotion of that type appropriate to its circumstances: I value my life (focus) and am therefore afraid of the tiger (target), which is a threat (formal object) to my life. Others have made complementary points in slightly different ways. For instance, Glas (2017) observes that emotions have a "double intentionality"; they are directed at concrete objects and also at the self, as they involve some appreciation of how states of affairs impact upon our concerns and thus upon "who" we are. Our emotional reactions to events therefore "say" something about us, something that we may have varying degrees of insight into. As Cholbi (2019) puts it with respect to grief, our emotional response to a death relates to our "practical identity".⁵

We can employ these distinctions to conceptualize the course of grief over time. A grief process involves relating the target (or concrete object) of grief to its focus and thus *recognizing* the actual and potential implications of a death for the structure of one's life. Where the implications of a death are far-reaching and wide-ranging, as in the case of profound grief, the match between target and focus cannot be accomplished instantaneously. Instead of swift recognition, there is—and, we will suggest, can *only* be—a gradual process of "sinking in", where comprehension, emotional response, and adaptation are inextricable.⁶

Hence, contrary to what is sometimes assumed, grief is not a response to a distinct and prior recognition of loss, and so it would be a mistake to ask whether it is an appropriate

⁵ Cholbi draws on Korsgaard's (1996) conception of "practical identity". Our emphasis here on losing *life-possibilities* could be couched in these terms. Losing certain possibilities that are central to the structure of one's life involves experiencing and negotiating a disrupted sense of *who* one is—the roles, statuses, commitments, and projects that render one's life-structure distinctive.

⁶ For further discussion of emotional "sinking in" during grief, see also Furtak (2018, Chapter 4) and Ratcliffe (2019).

or rational response to something already understood. Instead, what it is to grieve is—in part—to undergo a gradual process of recognition and comprehension. This is exemplified by numerous first-person accounts of grief experiences, all of which convey an initial disconnection between endorsing the proposition that “D is dead” and really coming to *believe it* by integrating it into the structure of one’s life. The difference between the two does not consist in *degrees* of belief; the relevant proposition may be endorsed without any doubt whatsoever. However, what remains lacking is a qualitatively different kind of appreciation, also sometimes referred to as “belief”, which involves integrating something into one’s life in a manner that cannot be wholly accounted for in terms of relations between propositions. This process of reconciling target with focus involves frequent conflicts between habitual ways of thinking, acting, and experiencing that continue to presuppose the deceased and moments of emotional acknowledgement.⁷ For most of us, these diminish in intensity and frequency over time. For example, consider the following passages from Juliet Rosenfeld’s memoir, *The State of Disbelief*:

I remember waking up early one Sunday weeks later in our house in the country, and looking out at the fields beyond our garden wall and, suddenly, catastrophically knowing he was not there, would never ever be there again. [...] I began to *know*, without thinking, that he was gone, in the same way you know that your hand is attached to your wrist or that water comes out of the tap when you turn it on. (Rosenfeld, 2020, p.26, p.35)

Many people describe a pronounced experience of tension between somehow knowing that a person has died and yet being unable to fully grasp the fact. This may be brief or enduring, localized or non-localized. It might seem as though one is in a movie, that this can’t be happening, that it doesn’t make sense. But what does the tension consist of? Writing of her own experience, the philosopher Susan Dunston distinguishes two kinds of *knowing*: “I know certainly that my brother is dead, that he killed himself, and at the same time such a thing is inconceivable, inexplicable, and unknowable to me (in the clear and distinct way that Descartes sought anyway)” (Dunston, 2010, p.165). A distinction might be drawn here between explicit propositional cognition and unreflective, habitual practice. However, it

⁷ We will not address the question of whether grief involves “feelings” or how those feelings might relate to other aspects of grief. However, it should not be assumed that we are offering a “cognitive” account of grief, of a kind that emphasizes cognitive evaluations of events in contrast to any associated feelings. Our position is also compatible with the view that certain feelings, including bodily feelings, contribute to the experience and comprehension of certain things external to one’s body (see, for example, Ratcliffe, 2008, 2015; Colombetti, 2014; Furtak, 2018).

would be wrong to construe the latter as something nonconceptual and thoughtless. It is not just patterns of practical activity but also patterns of thought that arise periodically, despite one's "knowing" that someone is dead. Joan Didion's memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* describes experiences of this nature, which arose following her husband's death. She writes of how her thoughts and activities were often at odds with the reality of his death:

I could not give away the rest of his shoes.

I stood there for a moment, then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return.

The recognition of this thought by no means eradicated the thought. (Didion, 2006, p.37)

Although some such experiences might be accounted for in terms of forgetting something and then remembering it, this does not capture what Didion describes, where there is an experience of ongoing tension between certain thoughts and the reality of the death. Such tensions can be wide-ranging, enveloping how one's situation as a whole is experienced and conceptualized. Thus, a consistent theme in autobiographical accounts of bereavement is that of acknowledging the death and *at the same time* continuing to feel that it does not make sense—that this is somehow impossible; it can't be happening:

In my external world, I lived in the strangeness of a house, his house, our house, where he was not, yet where everything that was his was still in place. The impossibility of that, I think now. His toothbrush and socks next to mine. (Rosenfeld, 2020, p.248)

What does this sense of impossibility or inconceivability involve? We suggest that, phenomenologically speaking, the actual and potential presence of the person who has died remains etched into one's *experiential world*, in a wide-ranging and integrated way. To accept this, it must be acknowledged that, more generally, our immediate experiences of things are imbued with a sense of how they are actually and potentially significant in the context of our lives, how those things *matter*.⁸ For instance, one sees the contents of one's study as an integrated, meaningful whole that reflects an ongoing writing project. This might, but need not, be understood in terms of specifically *perceptual* content. On a "liberal" view of perceptual content, we can perceptually represent a wider range of features than—in the

⁸ That we experience our surroundings as offering various different kinds of significant possibilities is a consistent theme in the phenomenological tradition. See Ratcliffe (2015) for a detailed discussion and defence of the position.

case of vision—colour, shape, and location. For instance, and most relevantly for our purposes, perceptual content can include what are often referred to as “affordances”: perceptible opportunities for action.⁹ However, we need not take a stance on this issue here; it suffices to allow that how we *experience* our surroundings before resorting to any explicit inferences includes experiencing various ways in which things matter. And all or almost all of the ways in which things matter have the potential to implicate a particular person. The reason the death cannot be comprehended in an instant is that we initially have the thought “D is dead” against the backdrop of an experiential world that continues to presuppose the person who has died; her potential presence is still etched into our surroundings. And this is why the target of grief cannot be instantaneously matched with the focus. The practical meanings adhering to various things do not change immediately; we continue to experience *his* toothbrush, *our* home, the park where *we* walk. During the process of grieving, these enduring experiences of practical meanings associated with the person who has died give rise, in turn, to experiences of conflict or tension.¹⁰

In her book *Objects of the Dead*, Margaret Gibson describes a variety of ways in which relations with those who have died are embodied in objects such as personal possessions and how the dead somehow endure through various objects associated with them: “Most of us live with traces of the dead in the form of furniture and other objects that have always been there or have recently entered our lives and households” (Gibson, 2008, p.1). Certain conflicted experiences serve to illustrate—vividly—how objects can be imbued with a significance that depends on a particular individual. Take this well-known passage from Simone de Beauvoir’s account of her mother’s illness and death:

As we looked at her straw bag, filled with balls of wool and an unfinished piece of knitting, and at her blotting-pad, her scissors, her thimble, emotion rose up and drowned us. Everyone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than in any one of its instants. They lay there on my table, orphaned, useless, waiting to turn into rubbish or to find another identity. (Beauvoir, 1964/1965, p.98)

⁹ See, for example, Siegel (2014) for discussion of affordances in the content of perceptual experience. See also Rietveld and Kiverstein (2014) for a conception of affordance that seeks to accommodate the associated phenomenology and also allows for affordances that are specific to a particular person. For an alternative approach, which rejects the affordance-concept, see Ratcliffe and Broome (in press).

¹⁰ It would therefore be misleading to construe the tension addressed here in terms of a conflict between “belief” and “alief” (Gendler, 2008). Whereas “alief” (if there is such a thing) is a distinctive type of affective attitude that occasionally comes into conflict with “belief”, we are concerned with forms of experience where propositional beliefs with specific contents come into conflict with how a person continues to experience the world as a whole. The latter is not a discrete attitude with a circumscribed content.

The bag appears somehow out of context, offering practical possibilities that are experienced *as* conflicting with a larger situation in which the death is acknowledged. In other cases—where the loss has started to “sink in”—things are instead experienced as *lacking* such possibilities. For example, Joyce Carol Oates (2011, p.63) describes being “reduced to a world of *things*”, meaning entities that are bereft of their former practical significance. These things, she writes, “retain but the faintest glimmer of their original identity and meaning as in a dead and desiccated husk of something once organic there might be discerned a glimmer of its original identity and meaning”. Another form of experience associated with grief involves experiencing situations and activities as practically meaningful for others, while at the same time feeling curiously cut off from them oneself: “Planes still landed, cars still drove, people still shopped and talked and worked. None of these things made any sense at all” (Macdonald, 2014, p.15). Hence, what we are concerned with here is not a singular experience, but a number of different experiences that contribute to a larger grief process. They share in common a tension between the way in which an experiential world is or was structured and the full implications of someone’s death. Attig (2011, xxxix) thus refers to “relearning the world”—a “multi-dimensional process of learning *how* to live meaningfully again after loss”. Read (2018, p.181) similarly observes that “our very world has to change (for us to emerge from grief)”.

It is clear, then, that grief is not simply a rational or irrational *response* to someone’s death. Rather, it involves a process whereby one negotiates disturbances of an experiential world that rational thought more usually presupposes. Someone who comes close to saying this is Martha Nussbaum (2001). Her “cognitive” account refers to “grief propositions”, prompting the criticism that she takes grief to consist in “cool, intellectual judgment” (Moller, 2017). However, in reflecting on her own experience of grief, Nussbaum remarks on how learning of her mother’s death “violently tears the fabric of hope, planning, and expectation that I have built up around her all my life”, adding that “the experience of mourning is in great part an experience of repeatedly encountering cognitive frustration and reweaving one’s cognitive fabric in consequence” (2001, p.80). She further acknowledges that the upheaval does not *follow* comprehension of the death. Instead, the “full recognition” of what has happened “*is* the upheaval” (2001, p.45). So, Nussbaum does not in fact appeal to “cool, intellectual judgment”. However, what is needed in order to guard against such misinterpretations is some account of how “cognitive” propositional thought can conflict with something that could equally be labeled as “cognitive”, but is importantly different in kind.

With this, we can come to appreciate why it takes time to integrate the target and focus of grief, to reconcile what has happened with the structure of one's life. Gustafson, too, might be seen as reaching for the conflict we have described, with his idea that grief involves the irrational "counter-belief desire" that the person for whom one grieves not be dead. But, as we have shown, it cannot be adequately captured in terms of the conflict between beliefs and desires.

In fact, we are not sure that *any* established terms in philosophy serve to mark the distinction in the required way, which is perhaps why it has proved so elusive. It is not simply a matter of propositional thought versus habit, feeling, or perception. The aspect of cognition that we are concerned with—reflected initially in an inability to comprehend the loss—encompasses all of the latter and has conceptual organization too. When one is not undergoing a profoundly disruptive experience such as grief, these different facets of thought and habitual engagement with the world are generally experienced seamlessly. What is therefore needed is a way of distinguishing between propositional cognitions that are alienated from the practically meaningful experiential world and other (sometimes conflicting) patterns of thought that remain integrated into that world.

What does all of this tell us about grief's rationality? First of all, while grief does involve a tension between two different kinds of thought-patterns (and much else), it equally involves the process of *resolving* this conflict. So, it should not be considered inherently irrational in the way suggested by Gustafson's account, according to which it involves a straightforward incompatibility between a belief and a desire. Second, what we have described here is consistent both with the idea that we are resilient in the face of loss, and—as we will further discuss in the next section—the view that grief's diminishment over time does not make it irrational. On the issue of resilience, it is important to distinguish between (a) resilience as reverting back to how things were and (b) resilience as the successful negotiation of profound life-disruption, something that can involve substantial changes to an experiential world once taken for granted and to a sense of *who* one is. If what we have said is broadly right, then resilience in grief *cannot* consist of (a), at least not where the person who died was a significant part of one's life. Recognition of and response to loss *imply* a process of adjustment. Without this, the experiential world would remain forever unchanged in the face of propositional acceptance, amounting to a disconnection from one's current reality. And that would indeed qualify as irrational. So, grief is not simply a rational or irrational *response* to a person's death; it is integral and essential to the comprehension of loss. The kinds of tensions we have described here are not a matter of "irrationality". They

are inextricable from the ability to recognize and respond to significant life-changes. For beings that think, act, and perceive against the backdrop of a practically meaningful experiential world, the organization of which depends on relations with others, what we have described is unavoidable. Focus and target could not be matched in any other way.

One might take the line that these facets of grief stem from the contingent architecture of human cognition; the loss of a person takes time to sink in, but things could have been otherwise. As Moller (2007) suggests, we can at least contemplate the possibility of super-resilient beings who do not experience grief at all. Thus, what we have sketched here could be construed as a merely *psychological* account of grief's diminution, one that leaves it unresponsive to the grieving person's reasons. However, it is not so clear that alternatives such as Moller's really are conceivable. We have suggested that the actual case of human grief does not involve reacting to something that is independently understood. Instead, a grief process involves coming to recognize the implications of what has happened. This takes time because the structure of a life depends on the presence of a particular person in numerous ways that cannot be instantly revised. To conceive of a being for whom this were not the case would be to imagine something radically cognitively and phenomenologically different from us: a being that does not find itself immersed in a habitually organized, practically meaningful world that its various thoughts, perceptual experiences, and activities presuppose.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize what a change in the structure of a human life, of the kind that is integral to grief processes, requires. Once taken-for-granted patterns of thought, action, and experienced meanings are lost, while new ones are formed. It is wholly unclear how this could be achieved without continued engagement with the social world over a prolonged period of time. Thus, it is highly doubtful that we can "imagine", from the first-person perspective, a super-resilient being who swiftly comprehends loss and experiences no grief. Indeed, it is debatable whether we are able to conceive of such a being in any way, even if we take ourselves to be doing so. To avoid the kind of protracted grief process described here, we would have to care deeply for someone who has died, but without that person being integrated into our life in any significant way. Even if this can be spelled out in a manner that avoids the self-contradiction of *caring for someone whom one does not care about*, it certainly does not apply to the vast majority of interpersonal relationships.¹¹ Hence,

¹¹ In this way, we can account for Wittgenstein's observation that experiencing deep grief for only a second is somehow incoherent (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.174).

to label the relevant aspects of grief as “irrational” would be to render the very structure of human cognition irrational, without having a “rational” alternative to contrast it with.

Given what we have argued, it is not surprising or puzzling that grief changes over time and generally subsides. Indeed, any profound upheaval will require some form of prolonged adjustment process for much the same reasons. It would therefore be puzzling if grief did not. Nevertheless, one might still object that we have painted an implausibly selfish picture of grief; it seems to be all about injury to *my* world, to *my* practical identity, and it is transitory to the extent that adjustment is possible. What Moller, Marušić, and others acknowledge, and what we have not so far considered, is that grief is not just about oneself; it is also concerned with what has happened, irrevocably, to someone else. To respond to this objection and show how grief can indeed concern the death of another person, rather than just the impact on one’s own life, we will now address the question of what the process-structure of grief tells us about its *object*.

The Object (s) of Grief

As we have seen, some maintain that the proper object of grief is not transitory; it is the loss of a person (Moller, 2007; 2017) or that person’s being dead (Marušić, 2018). This gives rise to a tension between grief diminishing over time and the unchanging nature of its object. However, an alternative proposal to consider, which seems to better complement our emphasis on grief’s dynamic, temporally extended structure, is that grief’s object consists in the loss or significant transformation of a *relationship* in which one is heavily invested. In support of this view, Michael Cholbi writes:

We grieve for the *relationship* we lose with the deceased person. That is, grief’s object—what sustains a bereaved person’s attention throughout an episode of grief—is how her relationship is necessarily transformed by the other’s death. (Cholbi, 2017, p.259)

In contemplating grief’s rationality, Cholbi suggests that we should not be preoccupied with whatever motivations arise from grief, such as those that Gustafson associates with the desire that someone not be dead. Rather, the rationality of grief is “backward-looking”; it is a matter of whether and to what extent grief is an appropriate response to something that *has* happened—to the loss or significant disruption of a relationship. In this respect, it is comparable to certain other emotions, such as joy, where the principal criterion for assessing rationality is proportionality to a preceding event that also

happens to be its object. Cholbi's approach offers a solution to Moller's problem. Although adjusting to an altered relationship involves emotional responses that diminish over time, it need not conclude with altogether abandoning the relationship. Instead, we might retain one or another kind of enduring connection or "bond" with the deceased (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, 1996). Hence, "resilience" need not capture all there is to our "ethical engagement with the deaths of our loved ones" (Cholbi, 2019, p.494). Furthermore, it is easier to see why grief changes over time. Adapting to the radical alteration of a relationship involves determining how, if at all, it can and will continue. That process takes time and follows a "trajectory" (Cholbi, 2019, p.498).

Although we have some sympathy with this position, we think it is importantly incomplete. Instead, we suggest that it is a mistake to contrast a death, someone's being dead, there having been a loss, the loss of a relationship, and so forth, as though they were rival candidate objects of grief. One worry we have is that focusing exclusively on the loss or transformation of a relationship fails to accommodate the nature or extent of one's concern for *the person who has died* and *what that person has lost*. Perhaps it is not enough to say, as Cholbi (2019, p.496) does, that a bereavement is "a catalyst for a crisis in our relationship", and thus an emotional response that is geared towards sustaining the relationship in a modified form. Responding to the worry that his account makes grief too egocentric, Cholbi suggests that the grieving subject's attention to the relationship encompasses the deceased as well. This takes the form of coming to know facts that are "about the deceased and the bereaved", a form of knowledge in which bereaved individuals cannot "cleanly distill the process of knowing the deceased from knowing themselves" (2019, p.505). However, for this to be plausible as a comprehensive account of concern for the deceased, it would need to be further shown that such concern is *exhausted* by a preoccupation with significant facts about a relationship. If that were so, then sentiments along the lines of "I would give my own life to have her back" or "I wish I could trade places with her" would be incoherent, and it is not clear that they are.

Another problem with Cholbi's account of grief's object is its emphasis on what *has* happened, the loss or transformation of a relationship.¹² More generally, we propose that the object of grief should *not* be thought of principally in terms of something concrete that is no

¹² This is not to suggest that Cholbi regards grief as exclusively past-directed. Instead, he conceives of it as "the unfolding of an engagement with a relationship that has been lost or transformed" (2017, p.270). Nevertheless, the object of grief remains something that *has* happened: the loss of a relationship. Insofar as the rationality of grief depends on its appropriateness to this object, Cholbi takes it to be "backward-looking".

more, something that was once part of one's world and has been removed from it. Our argument has two steps. First of all, it is clear that certain other experiences of "loss" should not be understood in those terms. Consider, for instance, the grief reported by some of those who have been unable to have children. Regardless of whether the term "grief" is employed here, not having had children can certainly be associated with a profound sense of loss. Often, this is not directed primarily at specific, historical events such as miscarriages, abortions, failed IVF treatments, or the discovery of infertility. Rather, what is most salient is the loss of certain *future* possibilities. One's projects, commitments, and expectations were oriented towards those possibilities, one's sense of the future shaped by them. As it becomes clear that they cannot be actualized, there is a temporally extended process of recognition and reorientation. Expectations in which one was heavily invested over a long period, and which shaped one's life, are experienced as dashed (Day, 2016).¹³ Although the sense of loss does not involve something concrete that once was and now is not, what is experienced as lost can still be quite specific in nature. For example, knowing that she does not have long left to live, Kate Gross writes of the third child she had planned to have and now will never have:

So, Plan Josie became Josie the baby ghost. Now she is a little girl who grows older only in a parallel world, the kind you find by accident at the back of a wardrobe, or through a crease in time. I think about her often. She is true and real in another life I'm having, somewhere else. (Gross, 2014, p.87)

A configuration of previously live and salient possibilities is thus experienced as extinguished without the preceding loss of a concrete object.

At this point, one might respond by insisting that the phenomenology of grief over a death, which is past-directed, differs from the type of loss-experience sometimes associated with childlessness. However, even though the two may indeed differ in various important ways, a consideration of loss experiences that do not involve first having and then ceasing to have something concrete serves to make explicit a structure that they share with experiences of bereavement. This brings us to the second step in the argument: There is a puzzle that applies to all three accounts of grief's object so far mentioned: a death; a person's being dead; and the loss or transformation of a relationship. These accounts need to provide a further

¹³ See also Gateway Women, a support network for childless women: <https://gateway-women.com/>

specification of what, exactly, is lost when someone dies. Suppose Person D dies at Time 5, aged 50. At that moment, do we also lose D at earlier times 1, 2, 3, and 4, when D was a baby, a young child, a teenager, and in their late 20s? That seems implausible. Assuming we ever lose “D at Times 1, 2, 3, and 4”, it seems that we have already done so, long before they died. On the other hand, it seems equally implausible to maintain that we grieve only for a temporal part of D, of whatever duration. Furthermore, D may change radically over time: D as a baby at Time 1 is quite different from D as an eight-year-old at Time 2, D as a teenager at Time 3, and so on. The point applies similarly to relationships. Granted, relationships can change considerably over time, while still enduring. Nevertheless, the relationship that one had with a newborn baby is very different in nature from one’s subsequent relationship with a teenager. Hence, much of what we regard as integral to a person whom we care about or to a cherished relationship has already been lost between Times 1 and 5. Yet we do not, for the most part, suffer intense grief in recognizing and contemplating such historical change, just occasional moments of sadness and nostalgia.

What, then, is lost? Such considerations suggest that grief over a death, like grief over childlessness, is not principally about the subtraction of something concrete from one’s world, whether it be a person or a relationship. Rather, in both cases, we suggest that the object of grief is a *loss of life-possibilities*. By this, we mean significant possibilities that are integral to the structure of one’s life, to one’s various projects, pastimes, habitual activities, and commitments. A loss of possibilities can be regarded as unitary and singular to the extent that (a) one’s life-structure consists of projects, pastimes, commitments, and habitual expectations that are interrelated and—for the most part—coherently organized, and (b) the deceased was integrated into one’s life-structure in a coherent way. As we have argued, it is not that one first recognizes the loss of these possibilities and then engages in a grieving process. Instead, the process we have described is integral to the recognition and negotiation of loss. The object of grief can also be characterized non-phenomenologically; there is a fact of the matter concerning the implications of a death for the structure of one’s life, and this is what a grief process engages with. However, phenomenologically speaking, this loss of possibilities does not precede and trigger the experience of grief. Rather, it is something that one comes to grasp over time *through* a grief process.

One might respond that an experienced loss of possibilities is consistent with Cholbi’s emphasis on losing a relationship; what is lost is not a past relationship, which has already changed and—in part—been lost already, but a potential relationship. However, that would be too restrictive. Our proposal does not imply that grief is directed towards the future *as*

opposed to the past. In fact, the past- and future-oriented aspects of grief are inextricable. When we remember events in our biographies, how those events matter to us and relate to one another depends on where we are heading now—which commitments and concerns we maintain, whether and how our values shift, whether certain projects and pastimes have become more or less central to our lives. How we relate to our past depends on which future possibilities currently matter to us. Sartre (1943/1989, pp.498-9) thus writes that we can and do change our autobiographical past, insofar as we continue to pursue and actualize significant possibilities of one or another kind: “All my past is there pressing, urgent, imperious, but its meanings and the orders which it gives me I choose by the very project of my end. [...] It is the future which decides whether the past is living or dead”. In the case of grief, Peter Goldie remarks on the parallels between how we relate to our past during grief and free indirect style in literature, where the perspectives of narrator and character are entangled. Memories involving the deceased are transformed by the death, by situating them in the context of what one now knows (Goldie, 2012, p.56). Importantly, what transforms one’s memories is not simply the fact of the person’s death, but also the loss of future possibilities involving that person. These differ from the kinds of possibilities previously associated with remembered events, leading to tensions and conflicts that are negotiated over time.

A key question to address is that of *whose* possibilities are involved in experiences of grief: my possibilities; your possibilities; or our possibilities. In the context of a close relationship, we are not simply preoccupied with furthering our own projects and relying upon input from the other person in order to actualize relevant possibilities. In addition, we care about the actualization of *their* possibilities and act in ways that are intelligible only relative to that end. Our own projects and commitments involve doing certain things for them. In other instances, the distinction between what is *mine* and what *is theirs* does not apply. Instead, certain possibilities are experienced as *ours*—it is us who strive to do this, in order to enhance a life that we share together.¹⁴ The three are typically phenomenologically inextricable, both before and after bereavement. Typically, when Person C contemplates Person D and concerns herself with D’s well-being, C does not begin by extricating herself fully from all facets of the relationship with D, in order to contemplate D from a more objective standpoint that involves selfless concern for D. Instead, C continues to encounter D

¹⁴ For current purposes, we remain agnostic about the phenomenological and metaphysical nature of the “we” or “us” involved here.

within the context of a shared experiential world that is itself organized in terms of the relationship between them and therefore continues to presuppose that relationship. We might say that C does not have a wholly independent sense of *who* D is.¹⁵ Given this, the same unitary loss of life-possibilities can encompass C's current predicament, what has happened to D, and the past, current, and future relationship between C and D.

Hence, in conceiving of grief in terms of the loss of possibilities, we have in mind something that is phenomenologically singular, encompassing a "me", a "you", and an "us". The worry that this renders grief implausibly selfish is therefore misplaced; our account of grief's object does not make grief, or its diminution over time, *all about me*. The balance between possibilities that are mine, yours, and ours, will vary from case to case. Some grief experiences will involve greater preoccupation with one's own loss than others. (Given this, our approach is not limited to the context of bereavement; it could also be applied to experiences of loss more generally.) However, common to all cases is an experience of certain possibilities having been lost. When Person D changes markedly over time, there is ordinarily a sense of various possibilities having been actualized and subsequently built upon, even though others may have been set aside. But, with the death of D, there is instead a sense that unfolding arrangements of individual and shared possibilities and expectations have been interrupted, curtailed, negated, or extinguished.

Losses of possibilities can be conceived of in more or less abstract terms, as our descriptions of grief's object move towards or away from the particularities of a person's grief experience while also emphasizing one or another aspect of it. We can thus describe the object of grief as the loss of a relationship, the death of a person, or that person's being dead. However, these are not rival candidates for the status of *grief's object*. Instead, they are compatible ways of referring to different aspects of a larger, singular disturbance of possibilities that is experienced, understood, and negotiated over time.

An implication of our account is that the *phenomenology* of grief does not conform to a straightforward distinction between the formal and concrete objects of emotion. There are three reasons for this. First of all, if the formal object of grief is taken to be a loss of life-possibilities, this is not something that is experienced, in its entirety, at a particular moment. Rather, grief involves recognizing and engaging with the significance of various, more specific aspects of loss at different times. Second, grief does not have a singular concrete

¹⁵ For instance, as pointed out by Higgins (2013, p.160) those who are married tend to share a singular life-narrative: "one now lives out one's story in tandem with someone else's".

object or target. At a given time, experiences that are integral to a longer-term grief process might be directed at the death, the manner in which it occurred, the fact that someone is irrevocably gone, one's own resultant predicament, how one will cope, or the loss of transformation of a present or past relationship. But these are all aspects of a wider-ranging loss of possibilities and qualify as objects of grief only insofar as we experience and engage with them *as such*. The event of a death, for instance, is the *cause* of grief, rather than what the experience of grief is *about*—what the grief process comprehends. The object of grief is not the death *per se*, but the death *as a loss of possibilities*. Returning to our earlier discussion of Helm (2009), one could say that the *target* of a grief experience, if it is to be identified with grief's *object*, is not the event of the death, but that event insofar as it pertains to the focus, to the structure of one's life. A third complication is that the object of grief at any given time can be described, thought about, and even *experienced* with varying degrees of abstraction: there has been a loss; a loss to me, to the deceased and to us; a loss of projects that are integral to a life; a loss of more specific possibilities associated with those projects.

There might well be good reasons for retaining a distinction between formal and concrete objects that have nothing to do with the accompanying phenomenology (for example, for the purposes of distinguishing and classifying types of emotions). However, the *experience* of grief proves more complicated. It is not just a matter of distinguishing between the contingent, concrete object of an emotional episode (e.g., a charging bull) and the type of evaluative property it possesses (threat). In addition, we are required to distinguish the object of a heterogeneous, temporally extended process from the various interrelated objects of its constituent experiences, where the latter can be described at different levels of abstraction. Thus, if the formal/concrete distinction is to reflect the phenomenology of grief (with loss of life-possibilities as the formal object), it will need to be reconceived of in terms of a part-whole relation. The process as a whole engages with a loss of life-possibilities, while constituent experiences relate to more specific aspects of this, which have varying degrees of concreteness.

As a process that is central to experiences of grief involves coming to comprehend grief's object, it is not irrational that it should diminish over time. Comprehension of lost possibilities takes place over time and, we have argued, must do so. However, to subdue any lingering worries over the compatibility of something that diminishes over time with an enduring object of emotion or a person's enduring significance, it is also important to note that negotiating a loss of life-possibilities encompasses various, importantly different *ways* in which people and things matter to us. How someone close to us matters is not exhausted by a

preoccupation with our pastimes and projects. Hence, although the disruption of various practical concerns and experiences of significance may be temporary, this is compatible with a distinct kind of concern for the person who has died, which outlasts those disruptions. For example, some bereaved children report having “internalized the deceased’s values, goals, personalities or behaviors as a way of remaining connected” to a parent who has died (Normand et al, 1996, p. 93). The worry that grief’s diminution over time shows that people matter to us less than we might think or hope they do involves a failure to distinguish these different types of concern. Moller (2007, p.310) emphasizes practical adjustment, noting that this can even involve a comprehensive “functional replacement” of the deceased by someone new.¹⁶ But functional replacement of Person D (e.g., through remarriage or having another child) is compatible with sustaining an enduring sense of connection with D. Similarly, Marušić’s formulation of the puzzle rests on an identification between how someone matters to us, *tout court*, and a more specific type of mattering that diminishes over time as we grieve: “It is the discrepancy between the duration of grief and the extent to which the loved one matters to us that gives rise to the puzzle—even if we acknowledge that over time the dead do, in fact, come to matter less” (Marušić, 2018, p.5). The tension can be dissolved by noting that there are qualitatively different kinds of “mattering” at work here. One of these may wane while another endures.¹⁷

None of this is to suggest that grief is always appropriate to its object and more generally rational; there are no doubt various different forms of irrationality that can and often (but not always) do afflict us in grief. For instance, a grief reaction would not be appropriate to its object where it involved steadfastly preserving aspects of an experiential world that are rendered unintelligible by a death. Grief can also be excessive, as when intense or prolonged grief reactions arise without either losses of close relationships or substantial disturbances of life-structure. However, what we have sought to show here is that certain puzzles that have worried others fall away with a more detailed consideration of the phenomenology of grief and—more specifically—its temporal structure.

¹⁶ See also Preston-Roedder and Preston-Roedder (2018) for criticisms of assumptions that Moller and others make about what it takes for someone to be both important to us and irreplaceable.

¹⁷ This distinction is also relevant to ongoing debates over whether and in what sense grief involves “letting go” of the deceased, a view associated with Freud (1917/2005) and others. It has been argued that, for the most part, the bereaved instead maintain “continuing bonds” with the deceased; the relationship is revised and sustained, rather than altogether lost (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, 1996; Klass, 2006; Higgins, 2013; Klass and Steffen, 2018). However, by distinguishing different types of concern that are integral to negotiating losses of possibility, we see that continuing bonds of certain kinds are compatible with letting go (construed in terms of habitual adjustment). Grief can involve both a transient process and an enduring relationship, where the latter is also compatible with an enduring sense of loss.

Acknowledgements: ****

References

- Attig, T. 2011. *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*. (Revised Edition.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beauvoir, S. de. 1964/1965. *A Very Easy Death*. Trans. P. O'Brian. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Bonanno, G. A. 2009. *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us about Life after Loss*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cholbi, M. 2017. Grief's Rationality, Backward and Forward. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XCIV: 255-272.
- Cholbi, M. 2019. Regret, Resilience, and the Nature of Grief. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 16: 486-508.
- Colombetti, G. 2014. *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Day, J. 2016. *Living the Life Unexpected: How to Find Hope, Meaning and a Fulfilling Future without Children*. London: Bluebird.
- De Sousa, R. 1987. *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Didion, J. 2006. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Dunston, S. 2010. Philosophy and Personal Loss. *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24: 158-170.
- Freud, S. 1917/2005. Mourning and Melancholia. In *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (Trans. S. Whiteside). London: Penguin: 201-218.
- Furtak, R. A. 2018. *Knowing Emotions: Truthfulness and Recognition in Affective Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gendler, T. S. 2008. Alief and Belief. *Journal of Philosophy* 105: 634-663.
- Gibson, M. 2008. *Objects of the Dead: Mourning and Memory in Everyday Life*. Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press.
- Gillies, J. and R. A. Neimeyer. 2006. Loss, Grief, and the Search for Significance: Toward a Model of Meaning Reconstruction in Bereavement. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19: 31-65.
- Glas, G. 2017. Dimensions of the Self in Emotion and Psychopathology: Consequences for Self-Management in Anxiety and Depression. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 24: 143-155.
- Goldie, P. 2012. *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gross, K. 2014. *Late Fragments: Everything I Want to Tell You About This Magnificent Life*. London: William Collins.
- Gustafson, D. 1989. Grief. *Noûs* 23: 457-479.

- Helm, B. W. 2009. Emotions as Evaluative Feelings. *Emotion Review* 1: 248-255.
- Higgins, K.M. 2013. Love and Death. In J. Deigh, ed. *On Emotions: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 159-178.
- Klass, D. 2006. Continuing Conversation about Continuing Bonds. *Death Studies* 30: 843-858.
- Klass, D., P. R. Silverman, and S. L. Nickman. Eds. 1996. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. London: Routledge.
- Klass, D. and E. M. Steffen. Eds. 2018. *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: New Directions for Research and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Korsgaard, C. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Macdonald, H. 2014. *H is for Hawk*. London: Vintage Books.
- Marušić, B. 2018. Do Reasons Expire? An Essay on Grief. *Philosophers' Imprint* 18/25: 1-21
- Moller, D. 2007. Love and Death. *Journal of Philosophy* 104: 301-316
- Moller, D. 2017. Love and the Rationality of Grief. In C. Grau and A. Smuts. Eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (On-line publication: Apr 2017; DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199395729.013.35).
- Normand, C. L., P. R. Silverman and S. L. Nickman. 1996. Bereaved Children's Changing Relationships with the Deceased. In D. Klass, P. R. Silverman, and S. L. Nickman. Eds. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. London: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, M. 2001. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Preston-Roedder, R and E. Preston-Roedder, E. 2018. Grief and Recovery. In A. Gotlib, ed. *The Moral Psychology of Sadness*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International: 93-116.
- Price, C. 2010. The Rationality of Grief. *Inquiry* 55: 20-40.
- Ratcliffe, M. 2008. *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. 2015. *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. 2017. *Real Hallucinations: Psychiatric Illness, Intentionality, and the Interpersonal World*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. 2019. Emotional Intentionality. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 85: 251-269.
- Ratcliffe, M. and M. Broome. In press. Beyond "Salience" and "Affordance": Understanding Anomalous Experiences of Significant Possibilities. In S. Archer. Ed. *Salience: A Philosophical Inquiry*. London: Routledge.
- Read, R. 2018. Can There Be a Logic of Grief? Why Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty Say 'Yes'. In O. Kuusela, M. Ometiță, and T. Uçan, eds. *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*. London: Routledge: 176-196.

- Rietveld, E. and J. Kiverstein. 2014. A Rich Landscape of Affordances. *Ecological Psychology* 26: 325-352.
- Rosenfeld, J. 2020. *The Sate of Disbelief: A Story of Death, Love and Forgetting*. London: Short Books Ltd.
- Siegel, S. 2014. Affordances and the Contents of Perception. In B. Brogaard, ed. *Does Perception Have Content*. New York: Oxford University Press: 51-75.
- Smuts, A. 2016. Love and Death, The Problem of Resilience. In M. Cholbi, ed. *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death*. London: Roman and Littlefield: 173-188.
- Teroni, F. 2007. Emotions and Formal Objects. *Dialectica* 61: 395-415.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.